

JOSEPH SOBRAN

The real JFK was charming, but weak man



WASHINGTON

The memorial obsequies for John F. Kennedy have never really stopped, and his image seems to have been frozen in time, like Miss Havisham's room. He was a charming man, all right. And his murder remains the most shocking public event of this century in America. But the sentimentalism has gotten out of hand.

I was 17 at the time of the assassination. As a young Catholic and hereditary Democrat, I warmly admired Kennedy. I had also feared that he might be killed.

This was not clairvoyance on my part. Kennedy was touring the South, where he was unpopular because of his liberalism on civil rights. It had crossed my mind that he might be the target of some die-hard segregationist.

When the news came from Dallas, my first thought was that my fears had been realized. The media were immediately full of fevered remarks about the "atmosphere of hate" in Dallas, where "the far right" was said to be active, if not predominant. That same day, according to former Kennedy speechwriter Richard Goodwin, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., the Kennedys' court historian, said reflexively, "What kind of country is this? Those who preach hate and violence, the far right. This was their doing."

That kind of talk sounded plausible then. But the man who was arrested for the murder turned out to be a believing communist, Lee Harvey Oswald, who actually had lived in the Soviet Union, married a daughter of the Soviet establishment, and come home to work on behalf of Fidel Castro.

At that point, liberal opinion made one of its typical swift switches — from over-generalizing about "the far right" to under-generalizing about the other extreme. Oswald was quickly and perman-

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ently categorized as a random phenomenon, a "madman" and "lone gunman." There was a remarkable paucity of moralizing about the hatred generated by the far left.

Kennedy himself had something to do with this. He had tried to anticipate the Barry Goldwater challenge by indiscriminately attacking "extremists" — a term that served to equate the strident but law-abiding John Birch Society with a worldwide communist movement that had no scruples whatever.

This was a theme that proved lastingly popular with the media. Somehow Kennedy was portrayed as a victim not of a communist fanatic but of a generic "extremism" that never was defined.

Kennedy's murder was the beginning of a decade of extremism, all right: riots, bombings, arson, violent talk that has changed the whole tone of American politics, and of course more assassinations. But the violence was seldom the work of that "far right" — the poor Birchers had no hand in it — but rather of various radical groups and disaffected minorities under the general sponsorship of the New Left.

Ironically, the new wave of violence invoked a favorite Kennedy catchword: "idealism." Until his own murder, Robert Kennedy tried to make excuses for the excesses of the left and expressed sympathy for such radical enterprises as donating blood to the Viet Cong. When he was killed, the Schlesingers again wailed that America was a "violent country" — another bit of over-generalizing, considering that Sirhan Sirhan was not exactly a Main Street American boy.

Teflon wasn't yet a household word in 1963, but John Kennedy was certainly more a Teflon president than Ronald Reagan. As the memorials of the last week illustrate, the media still fawn on him as they did during his life, in spite of a good deal of damaging information that has come to light over the past 25 years.

Kennedy's "idealism" was as thin as Gary Hart's "new ideas." Both men had too much trouble observing ordinary norms of behavior to be dreaming of remaking the world. Kennedy was actually a

weak man, and it falsifies what he was to speak of his assassination as if greatness had been nipped in the bud.

What I still like about him is not his bogus idealism but his genial skepticism. While he lived, politics was still more pastime than passion. When he died, our politics assumed the horrifying intensity that has been its hallmark ever since, as if jerked leftward by the leftist's bullet.

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